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RED CHINA

The Prize Defector

Nobody rejoices over a repentant sinner more than Red China's Premier Chou En-lai—particularly if the sinner is a highly placed defector from the West. To prove it, Chou ordered party flacks to go all out last week on a reception for 74-year-old Li Tsung-jen, Nationalist China's acting President during the final days of the Communist conquest, and Peking's biggest prize so far in the East-West defection game.

War lord of Kwangsi province during the 1920s and '30s, Li early urged a united front of Nationalists and Communists to fight the invading Japanese war machine, gave the weary Chinese their first major victory at Taierh-chwang in 1938. In 1948, as the civil war raged, Li fought China's first Western-style political campaign and nosed out President Chiang's favorite for the vice-presidency; months later, Chiang stepped aside to let Li have a chance at seeking peace with the Communists, then within sight of total victory. When Nationalist resistance collapsed, Li, a longtime critic of the Chiang regime, fled to the U.S., rather than Chiang's Formosa refuge.

Last month Li sold his house in Englewood, N.J., told friends he was going to Switzerland to be with his wife who was recovering from a cancer operation. He went to Switzerland, all right—then kept going east. At Peking Airport, he renounced his "guilty past," urged his colleagues on Formosa to "return to the embrace of the motherland" and create a new united front—this time against the "wolfish ambition" of the U.S.

Li's defection apparently followed months of patient persuasion by China's United Front Work Department, which has some of the same functions of the U.S.'s CIA, but at root may have been nothing more than the simple desire of an old man to return to the land of his birth. Said he: "I have returned home. After long years of absence, I am home again."

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